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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 CARACAS 000119

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY ANKARA PASS TO AMCONSUL ADANA  
AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO AMCONSUL ALMATY  
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF  
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL LEIPZIG  
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA  
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG  
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG  
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA  
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PASS TO AMCONSUL QUEBEC  
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/01/29

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: RE: Chavez Threatens "Radical Action" if Protests Continue

REF: 10 CARACAS 101; 10 CARACAS 89; 10 CARACAS 75; 09 CARACAS 1287  
10 CARACAS 109

CLASSIFIED BY: DUDDY, AMBASSADOR, DOS, AMB; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On January 28, hundreds of students gathered in cities across Venezuela for a fifth day of protests. Media reports indicate that since January 25, the protests have led to 2 deaths, nearly 70 injuries, and at least 60 arrests/detentions nationwide, although almost all of the students have been quickly released. On January 28, President Chavez threatened governors and police who failed to halt the protests. He discounted the possibility of a right-wing coup, but said he might have to lead a "rebellion from the left" to "deepen" the revolution. Chavez replaced the President of VTV, who had met with student protesters the previous day. On January 29, a pro-government daily called on "Bolivarian students" to defend "the revolution." More protests are planned over the weekend.

¶2. (C) As the protests continue over the next few days, post will be watching to see whether:

- a. The police and National Guard begin to use greater force against the students;
- b. This increased repression results in any breaks within Chavismo;
- c. Chavez closes additional private television and radio stations; and
- d. Chavez uses the protests as an excuse to cancel the elections or declare martial law.

End Summary.

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## Nationwide Protests Lead to Injuries and Arrests

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¶3. (SBU) Throughout the country, hundreds to thousands of students continued to protest the closing of RCTV, the killing of two students in Merida, electrical and water shortages, and the general situation of the country. Police and National Guard have responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, and arrests. The press has reported 2 deaths, nearly 70 injuries, and at least 60 arrests/detentions nationwide, with most of the students quickly released.

¶4. (SBU) In Trujillo, press reported 7 students detained. In Aragua, the media reported 11 students and two civil society members, including journalist Luis Noguera, were under court order to appear before a judge every 30 days and barred from leaving the country for allegedly resisting arrest following their participation in a January 26 march. In Anzoategui, 10 students

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were reportedly detained following their participation in a march, and another 10 were allegedly injured in subsequent police crackdowns. In Barinas, police use of tear gas and rubber bullets resulted in 4 injuries and 16 arrests; the 16 students were released several hours later pending legal proceedings. In Caracas, on January 28, the media reported that 15 students were detained but released by the end of the day.

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## Pro-Chavez Tupamaro Militants Challenge National Guard in Merida

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¶5. (C) The situation in Merida has been the most violent. There, clashes between pro-government Tupamaro militants and police and National Guard authorities intensified following the January 27 burial of 16-year old Yorsinio Jose Carrillo Torres, reportedly an ardent government supporter, who had been killed by a stray bullet during January 25 protests over the closure of RCTV International (ref b). According to an Embassy contact in Merida, throughout the afternoon and evening of January 27, Tupamaros circled the city on motorcycles chanting, "Yorsino, comrade, your death will be avenged." They reportedly threatened opposition Mayor Lester Rodriguez with chants, "Lester, assassin, you killed our boy," and during a call-in TV talk show, when a Tupamaro caller threatened, "We are looking for you."

¶6. (C) According to the press, also on January 27, the Tupamaros seized a gas truck, removed the gas containers, set the truck on fire, and then threatened to blow up the gas containers in an opposition-oriented residential area of the city. The National Guard reportedly surrounded the residence hall where the Tupamaros live to prevent them from further terrorizing the town. After a two-hour standoff, however, a shootout ensued, resulting in the wounding of two National Guard members. Embassy's Merida-based source commented that "everybody (in Merida) knows the truth that the Tupamaro are the governor's friends, since he rides around with them on his motorcycle. What is surprising is that the National Guard actually fired upon the Tupamaro." (Note: Merida State Governor Marcos Diaz Orellana is a loyal Chavista and led the

anti-U.S. protests and flag burning during the Ambassador's October 26 visit to the city. End Note.) On January 28, Tupamaros told the media they were against the injustices occurring in the city and would answer the call to anyone who needed them.

¶7. (SBU) On January 27, in an effort to reduce tensions in Merida, Interior and Justice Minister Tarek El Aissami and Merida-based Corpoelec Director Daniel Torres announced a temporary suspension of the electric and water outages that have paralyzed the city for the past ten months. As of January 28, the University of the Andes and the public schools remained closed.

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#### Protests Reported in Nine States

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¶8. (SBU) In Maracaibo, Zulia state, students marching in the city chanted, "We are not afraid. Damned is the soldier who fires at the people." (Note: The warning to the soldiers is a widely-cited statement by Simon Bolivar. End Note.) According to the press, a military helicopter overflew and observed the demonstration. According to a photo that appeared on the front page of the January 28 edition of El Nacional, the National Guard appeared before a group of seated students in Maracaibo armed with a chain and metal claw (see photo). The human rights community and students have protested the use of this weapon, which National Guard Spokesperson Coronel Antonio Benavides later publicly justified as "completely legal and a part of the anti-riot tools used to retrieve burning objects that impede roadways such as burning trash or tires."

¶9. (SBU) In Valera, Trujillo, the hometown of Marcos Rosales Suarez, one of the two students killed in Merida, opposition protestors and mourners alleged that armed "Chavista infiltrators" interrupted their protests and commemorative ceremonies. Los Andes Daily reporter Jhonathan Raul Segovia said he was physically attacked by a pro-Chavez supporter who destroyed his photographic evidence of confrontations between protestors/mourners and Chavistas.

¶10. (SBU) In Tachira, Juan Pablo Ramirez, spokesperson for the Tachira student movement, told the press, "We will be in the streets putting up a fight. We want our children to live in freedom." The press reported that armed Tupamaros threatened student protesters. Protests also occurred during half time of a soccer match when fans paraded on the field carrying banners in support of RCTV and freedom of expression. In Nueva Esparta (Margarita Island), students from the University of the West and the University of Margarita burned tires in the city of Porlamar and were eventually dispersed with rubber bullets and tear gas canisters by the police and National Guard.

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#### Caracas Protests Turn Focus to Electricity

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¶11. (SBU) On January 28, at least a thousand students marched from the Millenium Commercial Center to the headquarters of the electric company, Corporacion Electrica (Corpoelec), where they were eventually received by Corpoelec's vice-president. Students chanted, "I have no light, I have no water. For this Chavez, I say to you, it's time to go." In Caracas, the media reported at least 24 injuries during the first three days of protests. At the Andres Bello Catholic University, 15 students reported injuries. For the second night in a row, the official television station VTV carried footage of the student protests. VTV broadcast the Corpoelec vice president's encounter with the students on the street, including students challenging his statement that the electricity crisis was simply a result of the drought. Student leaders urged him to include students and university experts in work on a solution to the electricity crisis. (Note: On January 28, Chavez announced the replacement of VTV President Yuri Pimental, who had met with a student delegation the previous day, with Tania Diaz, the host of a

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VTV talk show. End Note.)

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Chavez Warns Governors and Protesters  
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¶12. (SBU) During a January 28 nationally broadcast radio and television address to inaugurate a Socialist Bicentennial Fund, Chavez deviated from the program to warn protesters that he would have a "radical response" if protesters continued throwing rocks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails at garrisons. Addressing Governor Henri Falcon of Lara state, "What's going on, Governor," after claiming that Falcon's strategy was to let the students wear themselves out. "I'm warning you, if the Lara police don't carry out their duties, I'm going to have to intervene." "My authority is the same in Lara, Merida, Zulia and Tachira ... I'll tell the Defense Minister to send out the National Guard." Chavez continued, "If the governor gets mad and decides to join the opposition, let him go!" (Note: The highly popular Henri Falcon is a member of Chavez' ruling PSUV party and has previously been warned by Chavez not to stray too close to the opposition. End Note.)

¶13. (SBU) Chavez also accused the opposition of plotting a civil war to justify the intervention of the "benefactor empire." He accused the Venezuelan bourgeoisie of using the students as "puppets" and looking for a death in order to provoke the military to act. Chavez said that "if anyone follows that path," he would be "forced to take radical decisions." "Do they want to test me? Keep on this path and they will succeed. I accept these challenges and I'll accept whatever test . . . let's see who can take more . . . I don't run from a battle." He urged the opposition to forget about a military coup. "They are provoking it, shooting at garrisons. It is a destabilizing plan. Today, a coup from the right is impossible, now a rebellion from the left that deepens the these changes is possible and I could lead it."

¶14. (SBU) On January 29, the front page of pro-government daily Diario Vea appealed to pro-Chavez students to demonstrate in support of the "Bolivarian revolution." The article, entitled "Where are the revolutionary students?" admonished pro-Chavez students, "Revolutionary students cannot give the streets to the provocations of a group of fascists. They should not tolerate threats to peace, democratic order, or the Bolivarian process. While groups of fascists mobilize teenagers and children from the private colleges and universities, where are the mobilizations of

revolutionary students defending the revolution?"

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Four Channels Back on the Air  
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¶15. (SBU) Out of the six channels classified as "national" producers by the government regulatory agency Conatel and pulled from the airwaves (reftels), four were back on the air by January 29 (Momentum, TV Chile, American Network, and Ritmo Son). The

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fifth, America TV, is reportedly in the process of submitting the documentation that will permit it to reopen too. RCTV remains off the air and does not plan to seek reconsideration by Conatel, although it has filed several motions with the Supreme Court (ref e).

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Comment  
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¶16. (C) The street protests that began on January 25 are considerably smaller than the 2007 demonstrations that followed the first closing of RCTV and, so far, have not been joined by the unions or the opposition political parties, despite their public statements of solidarity. The parties may be concerned that street protests could give Chavez a pretext to either disqualify individuals or parties from participating in the September legislative elections or to cancel them entirely.

¶17. (C) Despite the relatively small size of the protests, their proliferation throughout the country and the high degree of public sympathy for the student movement appears to be of concern to Chavez, who is facing serious economic and energy-related challenges in this electoral year.  
CAULFIELD